Why you should skip Napa and sip wine in California at these places instead

Kate Loweth   May 8, 2025

Wine connoisseurs can travel beyond the famed Napa Valley wine region to explore other vineyards like this one in the Santa Ynez Valley, Calif.
Photograph by Carolin Sunshine, Shutterstock

Here are 5 lesser-known California wine regions worth exploring

From the Temecula Valley to the Santa Cruz Mountains, these wine regions deliver more of the tailored experience you seek and less of the crowds.

When it comes to wine tasting in California, most people immediately think of Napa Valley, with its wineries and tasting rooms around every corner. If you look beyond this powerhouse region, you'll find wine destinations across the state, where the weekend traffic isn't as intense and you can get a more personalized wine tasting experience.

1. Lodi

Cool winds from the San Francisco Bay flow 90 miles east to the town of Lodi, creating the perfect environment for grape growing. The town owes its early prosperity to the Flame Tokay, a seeded variety of grape used for eating and not for wine. When seedless grapes took over the table grape market in the 1980s, thousands of acres of Flame Tokay were replaced with wine grape vines. Now, the region produces around 20 percent of California's wine grapes—more than Napa and Sonoma combined.

When you walk through the quaint downtown, you'll find the iconic Lodi Arch alongside colorful murals such as "Cycles of Suffrage," commemorating the 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Visitors can book a free walking tour with the official town docent Alane Dashner to learn about the town's history.

When you are ready for some wine tasting, you can book a ride on the Lodi Wine Trolley to make your way to wineries to taste the Old Vine Zinfandel and other varietals the region is known for. Or, you can make your way on your own to the dozens of wineries around town, such as Calivines Winery & Olive Mill. Visitors can find a shaded spot on the large patio to enjoy an olive oil and wine tasting experience.

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During the grape harvest, a worker pours a bucket of white grapes onto a tractor-trailer.
Photograph by Jordi Salas, Getty Images

Just east of San Francisco, the wineries in the twon of Lodi are known for their Old Vine Zinfandel and other varietals.
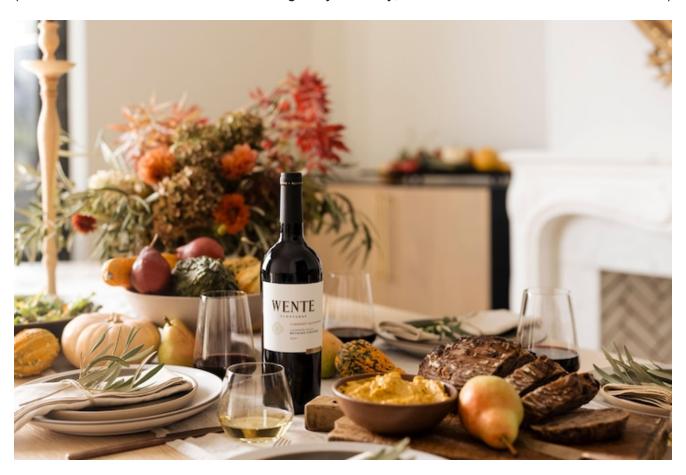Photograph by Stephanie Russo via Lodi Winegrape Commission

2. Livermore Valley

Just a 45-minute drive east of San Francisco, the Livermore Valley American Viticultural Area (AVA) is another easy option near the Bay Area. This is one of the oldest wine regions in the country, dating back to 1883 when Carl H. Wente and James Concannon founded the first commercial wineries in the area. The region boasts a large number of female winery owners and winemakers and a supportive community that encourages innovation and camaraderie.

Not only are the wine tasting prices in the Livermore Valley in line with Napa prices 15 to 20 years ago, but you'll also find winemakers often host the tastings, which gives you deeper insight into the wine production process.

The area is <u>keenly focused on the impact of climate change</u> on the wine industry—vineyards are eliminating herbicides and pesticides, using drip irrigation to reduce water usage, and having sheep graze pastures in the off-season instead of using tractors. Livermore Valley winemakers and growers <u>recently announced</u> their designation of Sauvignon Blanc and Cabernet Franc as the region's signature varietals. They are recognized for their historical significance in the area and their ability to withstand changes to agronomic conditions such as climate, soil composition, and water availability.

(*Related: <u>The ultimate Pacific Coast Highway itinerary, from San Francisco to Santa Monica</u>*.)

If you're visiting San Francisco, you can drive 45 minutes east to explore the wineries located in Livermore Valley, Calif.
Photograph by Stephanie Russo

3. Temecula Valley

Southern California visitors looking for wine tasting options can take advantage of their proximity to the Temecula Valley wine region, located just inland between <u>Los Angeles</u> and <u>San Diego</u>. While you might expect this region to be hot year-round, mornings and nights in the Temecula Valley can be downright chilly, allowing grapes to retain freshness while still developing flavor during the ripening process.

This dynamic wine region is known for its ingenuity and willingness to experiment, and you can even blend your own bottle at Bottaia Winery's blending lab. Many of the wineries in Temecula produce only a small amount of each vintage, so you'll need to visit to try them yourself. Enjoy the 90-point 2023 Viognier at Wilson Creek Winery, or go for their almond sparkling wine, a refreshing summer favorite. The best way to take in the area's beauty is on a sunrise hot air balloon ride over the vineyards.

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The Lodi region produces approximately 20 percent of California's wine grapes—more than Napa and Sonoma combined.
Photograph by Stephanie Russo via Lodi Winegrape Commission

Some California wineries, specifically in Temecula Valley, offer guests a hot-air balloon ride to get a bird's-eye view of their vineyards.
Photograph by Diane Trimble

4. Santa Ynez Valley

If you've watched the 2004 movie *Sideways*, you know all about this wine region located just inland from Santa Barbara on California's Central Coast. The mountains in the Santa Ynez Valley run east to west, funneling in the cool air from the Pacific and creating a terroir that's perfect for growing chardonnay, pinot noir, and other wine grapes.

Laid-back farming communities comprise the six towns within the region, and you'll feel those vibes when visiting wineries such as Fess Parker. You can ride horseback through the vineyards to a stunning 360-degree view of the valley before enjoying a wine tasting on the shaded patio.

While visiting the area, you shouldn't miss a stop in the quaint Danish town of Solvang, where you can ride the horse-drawn Solvang Trolley and enjoy Danish kringle and butter cookies at Olsen's Danish Village Bakery. If you're looking for a fragrant souvenir to take home, you should visit Clairmont Farms to walk through the lavender fields and purchase lavender-infused culinary and body products at the gift shop.

(*Related: Everything you should know about Santa Barbara*.)

5. Santa Cruz Mountains

Another California wine region with a unique topography is the Santa Cruz Mountains AVA. Nearly 300 small growers are tucked into the mountain between the ocean and the forest. Most of the area's wineries are family-owned and have limited distribution.

Small tasting rooms make you feel like welcomed guests as soon as you arrive. Pull up to the little red schoolhouse at Burrell School Vineyards in Los Gatos to sip chardonnay or cabernet franc on the veranda overlooking the vines. (Dogs are allowed). Another option for wine connoisseurs is to make a trip to Cooper-Garrod Vineyards in the Saratoga foothills. Visitors can see the resident horses and sip a glass of wine while enjoying live music on the garden patio.

If you want a truly California wine tasting experience, you should book a wine cruise on Monterey Bay with Chardonnay Sailing Charters. A local winery is featured on each sailing, and your cruise includes wine tasting, pizza, and a stunning sunset over the Pacific Ocean.

(*Related: Is this California wine region the new Napa? Its vintners hope not*.)

Kate Loweth is a freelance travel writer based in San Jose, California. She covers family travel, glamping, cruising, outdoor adventures, and solo travel. Her work has appeared in *AAA, AARP, Business Insider, SUCCESS Magazine*, *Viator,* and more.